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Column on Health Reform: *Health reform starts now!*

The following is a column by Marci Nielsen, PhD, MPH, Executive Director of the Kansas Health Policy Authority. The Health Policy Authority is a state agency created to develop and maintain a coordinated and data-driven health policy agenda.

Next week, Kansas legislators will return to Topeka to finish business for the 2007 Legislative Session. One of their top priorities will be passing a bill that sets the foundation for broad health reform in Kansas.

The Authority and Health for All Kansans Steering Committee has sent to the Legislature a consensus package that, one, makes a down payment on our dedication to reforming the system with incremental steps aimed at increasing health insurance coverage, and two, outlines a roadmap to developing health reform options *this year* with stakeholders across Kansas, for consideration by the 2008 legislature. Both of these elements have appeared in a bill that awaits full legislative approval.

One of the main elements of our package is premium assistance. Phased-in over the next four years, premium assistance will help low-income uninsured Kansas families to purchase private health insurance. It will ensure that parents and their children are part of the same health insurance plan, and help families have access to coordinated and consistent health care services through a “medical home” Research suggests that better health outcomes are associated with primary and preventive care provided through a regular source of care. Of the 290,000 Kansans currently uninsured, the plan being considered by the legislature will reduce that number by at least 10%.

Of course, we can do more to improve the overall health system, and the Health Policy Authority plans to do so. Over the next several months, with data at our fingertips, we will examine our options to help make Kansans healthier, improve the affordability and quality of health care and reduce the number of uninsured. In November, the Authority and Health for All Kansans Steering Committee will present to the Governor and Legislature data-driven health reform options that accomplishes these goals.

Health reform in Kansas is a monumental undertaking. It will require thoughtful analysis, rigorous debate and political courage. The first steps have already begun with the bipartisan efforts of the legislature and Governor—but the work this session is not done.

Contact your legislators and encourage them to act on Senate Bill 11 before they leave Topeka again. There has been a lot of talk about the need to reform our health system, and now is the time to take action!

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